PANDIT NATHURAM PREMI
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By Manish Modi

Can a man's handwriting change his future? Yes it can. It changed Pt Nathuram Premi's future and the history of Hindi language publishing in India. It was Pt Premiji's handwriting that took him to Mumbai, the city where he was to meet his mentor, Pannalal Bakliwal, and where, under the patronage of Seth Manikchandra, he was to start the Manikchandra Jain Granthamala, and later, his own publishing firm, **Hindi Granth Ratnakar Karyalay**. His contribution to Jain and Hindi literature through his own writings, as well as through his work in translation and publishing remains unsurpassed. A man of firm beliefs and strong principles, he used his editorship of the influential magazines Jain Mitra and Jain Hitaiṣī to advocate social reforms in the Jain community to which he belonged.

Born on 26 November, 1881 in Devari, in the district of Sagar in Madhya Pradesh, Nathuram Premi was the eldest child of Tundelal Modi, a travelling merchant whose business went into a slide because he was too soft hearted to collect his own dues. Premiji had two younger siblings, a brother and a sister.

Tundelal Modi was a merchant, belonging to the Paravāra community of Digambara Jains, hailing from Bundelkhand. Premiji grew up in a family that was staring at poverty. He studied in grammar school and was the monitor of his class. He cleared his pre-high school exams and became a school teacher at close by Rehli.

In the 19th century, Devari was remarkable for one feature. While there were two wells in Devari, only one had potable drinking water. The well was owned by a Muslim. Residents of Devari belonging to all communities drew their water from the same well, displaying an ecumenical and tolerant character that would be most welcome today!

Apart from his teaching activities, Premiji was a budding poet who wrote in Urdu and Braj. His guru was a certain Syed Amir Ali Mir who inspired him to write poetry. Young Nathuram wrote under the nom de plume of "Premi". His poems were published in the literary magazines of the time, Rasik Mitra, Rasik Vatika and Kavya Sudhakara. Premiji often said that he was not a spontaneous poet. His command of rasa, alaṅkāra and piṅgala gave him the impetus to write poetry. Premiji's mastery of Saṃskṛta grammar would help him greatly in future as well. Unfortunately, his poems are no longer available with us.

In the last years of the 19th century, he was married to Rama Devi, a beautiful and deeply religious lady from the nearby village of Sarkheda, district Sagar. They led a very happy married life. Premiji, a staunch supporter of women's empowerment, saw Rama Devi as a close friend and confidant and took great interest in educating her. (1)

At this time, the Digambara Jain Tīrthakṣetra Committee, situated in Mumbai, released an advertisement for an office clerk. Premiji sent in an application for the post. His beautiful handwriting won the job for him.

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Premiji arrived in Mumbai in 1901. He started working for the Digambara Jain Tīrthakṣetra Committee. (2) Here, he worked as a clerk. His efficiency and honesty soon ensured that he was running the entire office single handed. Right from accounts, to correspondence, to general administration and handling the safe, everything was entrusted to him.

He found an enthusiastic mentor in Pannalal Bakliwal who taught him Bengali. On his own, Premiji studied and mastered Gujarati and Marathi. His Saṃskṛta background helped him learn Prākṛta and Apabhraṃśa on his own.

Premiji's life was characterised by his 4 qualities:
1. Absolute honesty
2. Self-respect
3. Kindness
4. Unquenchable Willingness to Learn

Competence breeds jealousy. The all round competence and hard working ethics of Premiji made his co-workers insecure. Hence, a false complaint was made against Premiji alleging that he was not completely honest in his book-keeping. Premiji insisted that his books be audited. When the books and cash were tallied, it was found that there was some cash in excess. This was because Premiji, who had begun taking on translation jobs on his own, would keep his own earnings also in the office safe.

Premiji's name was cleared, but he decided to not work for anyone who would question his honesty. His self respect hurt, Premiji gave up his job and decided to start out on his own.

The owner of Hirabaug, Seth Manikchandra Javeri JP, had seen Premiji and was impressed by his honesty, diligence and deep intellect. He asked Premiji to take up rooms at the Hirabaug Dharmashala and start his business from there.

So Premiji took up one room at Hirabaug and started the Jain Granth Ratnakar Karyalay along with Pannalal Bakliwal. This was in the first few years of the 20th century. We see books published from 1906 by Jain Granth Ratnakar Karyalay.

In 1912, Premiji took up another three rooms at Hirabaug and started the Hindi Granth Ratnakar Karyalay as the proprietor. The first book published by Hindi Granth Ratnakar Karyalay was 'Svādhīnatā', a Hindi translation by Mahavirprasad Dvivedi of John Stuart Mills' contemporary classic, 'On Liberty'.

While he was working for the Digambara Jain Tīrthakṣetra Committee, Premiji, would also edit Jain Mitra, making it one of the most influential Jain magazines of that era.

Under Premiji's skilful editing, Jain Mitra became known as a progressive magazine, sound on Jain Siddhānta but willing the community to change with the times and give up its orthodoxy. Premiji's well researched editorials on Jain history were much appreciated.

In fact, Jain Mitra became a masthead for all those who wanted the Jain community to move forward and were known as the "sudhāravādī" as opposed to the conservatives, known as the

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"rūḍhīvādī". Premiji was at the epicentre of this movement for social freedom, universal progress and an emphasis on modern education.

Right from the first decades of the 20th century, Premiji began advocating the remarriage of Jain widows. This was unheard of in the conservative Jain community of that time and hence there was much hysterical opposition. But other Jain reformers, such as the famous Kṣullaka Ganeshprasadji Varni of Bundelkhand, publicly backed Premiji. (3)

Varniji had focused on building Jain pathashalas in Bundelkhand. An effort that is bearing fruit even today, a hundred years after Varniji commenced building pathashalas. Even in 2007, a large number of Digambara lay scholars come from Bundelkhand.

In fact, the Paravāra community of Bundelkhand has given birth to the most profoundly learned Jain lay scholars. Starting from Pt Nathuram Premi, the impressive roster has names such as Pt Devakinandan Śāstrī, Dr Hiralal Jain, Dr Mahendrakumar Nyāyācārya, Pt Phulchandra Śāstrī , Pt Hiralal Śāstrī, Pt Balchandra Śāstrī, Pt Jaganmohanlal Śāstrī, Dr Rajaram Jain and many others.

Pt Premiji was the first Jain scholar of the 20th century to carry out an academic study of Jain history. He was the inspiration for the øvetàmbara stalwarts Pt Sukhlal Sanghvi and Muni Jinavijaya who carried out immensely important studies in Jainism. Pt Sukhlalji and Muni Jinavijayaji along with Pt Becharadasji Doshi, Pt Agarchand Nahata and Dr Dalsukh Malvania have acknowledged their debt to Premiji in a festschrift dedicated to Pt Premiji. (4)

In fact, Premiji's festschrift, edited by the Vedic scholar Dr Vasudev Sharan Agarwal, was the first such work in the Jain community.

Another interesting incident, during the formal launch of the Premi Abhinandana Grantha gives us an insight into Premiji's character. The Abhinandana Grantha, ready in 1946 and carrying messages from Indian luminaries such as Sir Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, Purushottamdas Tandon and Kaka Kalelkar, was to be formally launched at a grand ceremony in Kolkata. A grand luncheon was to mark the occasion. Premiji had opposed the idea of a festschrift in his honour and had to be prevailed upon to go to Kolkata. But when he heard of the grand luncheon, he refused to attend the function as in that year, Bengal had suffered a famine and Premiji could not accept to be part of a grand luncheon when there were thousands of people dying of starvation.

While editing the Jain Mitra, Premiji started editing classics such as the Banārasīvilāsa, Daulatapadasaṃgraha, Jinaśataka, etc. His work on the Ardha Kathānaka was ready in 1912 - 1913, but he printed the book in 1943 as it was his policy to publish other scholars' works before his own.

After deciding to start out on his own, Premiji, who was known for his command of languages as well as grasp of Jain Siddhānta, was flooded with translation work. At the behest of the Shrimad Rajachandra Granthamala, he translated from Gujarati into Hindi Shrimad Rajachandra's Mokṣamālā for which he received a then princely sum of ₹80. The uniqueness of this translation was that he translated the prose segments into prose and the

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poetry segments in verse form.

He further translated Ācārya Amṛtacandra's Puruṣārthasiddhyupāya from Saṃskṛta to Hindi. All along, Premiji unwaveringly kept editing the Jain Mitra. In 1912, he founded the Jain Hitaiṣī, a Jain magazine with a reformist and questioning approach.

Jain Hitaiṣī was known for the forthright views of its editorials and boasted excellent well-researched academically sound articles on various topics related to Jain history, culture and society. Premiji's exhaustively researched scholarly articles on Jain history were trend-setters and paved the path for the academic study of Jainism by lay Indian scholars in the 20th century.

His Jain Sāhitya aur Itihās, set the benchmark for scholarly research into Jain history. It is a collection of articles that he wrote for Jain Mitra and Jain Hitaiṣī.

These articles were later re-edited by him and produced in book form, first in 1942 and the second edition in 1956.

While doing the second edition of the Jain Sāhitya aur Itihās, he was helped greatly by his grandson Yashodhar's wife, Vijayalaxmi. He taught her Saṃskṛta, Bengali and Marathi. She was to help him greatly by proofreading his writings.

Premiji also edited and published Ardha Kathānaka, Banārasīvilāsa and many other Jain works, including Kundakunda's Bārasa Aṇuvekkhā.

On 24 September 1912, Premiji founded his famous publishing house, **Hindi Granth Ratnakar Karyalay** (now known as **Hindi Granth Karyalay**) by publishing a Hindi translation of John Stuart Mill's On Liberty, titled Svādhīnatā. The Hindi translation was by none other than Pt Mahavir Prasad Dvivedi, whose celebrated Hindi magazine Sarasvatī was regarded by Premiji as the benchmark for Hindi quarterly publications.

Premiji's publication house, Hindi Granth Karyalay became synonymous with the best Indian literature. He published almost the entire oeuvre of Sharatchandra Chattopadhyaya, the great Bengali writer and some works of Rabindranath Tagore, such as Āṃkh kī Kirkirī, Naukā Ḍūbī, etc. Apart from publishing Hindi translations of these Bengali classics, Premiji also published Hindi translations of the legendary Gujarati writer KM Munshi, such as Gujarāt ke Nāth, Pātaṇ kā Prabhutva, etc.

Premiji and Munshi Premchand were close friends. Premiji also published the first edition of Munshi Premchand's classic novel, often hailed as the greatest novel in Hindi, Godān. Munshi Premchand, during his stay in Mumbai, stayed in Premiji's house for a few months. Apart from Godān, Premiji published Premchand's short story collections entitled Nava Nidhi and Sapta Saroj.

Premiji was always keen on publishing new, unpublished writers and he published many new writers for the first time - Hajariprasad Dvivedi, Jainendrakumar, Yashpal, Acharya Chatursen, Pt Sudarshan, etc.

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He also published the Bengali plays of Dvijendra Lal Rai for the first time in Hindi.
In memory of Seth Manikchandra, Premiji established the Manikchandra Jain Granthamala wherein he published Jain manuscripts for the first time systematically edited by philologists. The Manikchandra Jain Granthamala published over 40 Jain texts, mostly written in Prākṛta, Apabhraṃśa or Saṃskṛta.

Premiji ran the Manikchandra Jain Granthamala on an honorary basis all his life. All the books were sold at cost price.

He had certain set criteria for publishing books from his publication house.

1. He was very particular about what he would publish. Each book he chose was altruistic and idealistic. He was very clear that he would publish only the best literature and only published the best works of the topmost Hindi writers in the country. He made the occasional exception only to encourage and promote a young writer.
2. Premiji was extremely particular about the proofreading, and type-setting of each book. In an age where each book had to be painstakingly and laboriously typeset by hand, he was consciously striving to ensure that his publications would be free of typographic or syntactical errors.
3. Premiji was extremely keen on print quality and the production values of his books. He never compromised on paper quality or print quality. Even today, books published by him nearly a hundred years ago are in good condition owing to his emphasis on strong binding and high quality paper and printing.
4. Premiji's commercial life was ruled by ethics. He was transparently and scrupulously honest. No writer would fail to receive his royalty, the printers and paper suppliers were paid fairly and on time. He did not see competing publishers as his opponents. Instead, he saw them as his associates. Premiji did not let greed rule his business decisions.

Premiji lived his life at the vanguard of the Indian Renaissance Movement which began in the 20^{th} century and saw an unprecedented upsurge in education, health care, in the printing and publishing of classical Indian, medieval and modern literature and in the introduction and acceptance of sweeping social changes that awakened India from a sleepy nation rooted in the middle ages into the rapidly growing industrial and economic power that she is today.
Very appropriately then, the acclaimed Hindi novelist Vishnu Prabhakar called Premiji the "Bhīṣma Pitāmaha" of Hindi publishing.

Premiji lived a long life studded with literary and scholarly achievements. He had suffered from asthma for a long time and passed away owing to old age on 30 January, 1960.

He left behind his daughter-in-law and two grandsons. His great grandson Manish Yashodhar Modi continues his legacy.

Current activities of Hindi Granth Karyalay include publishing books on Jainism, Ethics and humanities.

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Hindi Granth Karyalay is the oldest bookstore of Mumbai and was one of the first to have its own website in 1999.

In Premiji's memory, his grandson Yashodhar Modi started the **Pandit Nathuram Premi Research Series.** Reflecting Pt Premiji's ecumenical nature and vast scholarship, this series has published select volumes focusing on subjects as varied as Jainism, philosophy and yoga published such prestigious scholars such as Premiji himself, Ludwig Alsdorf, Maurice Bloomfield, Padmanabh Jaini, Willem Bollée, Nalini Balbir, Olle Qvarnström, Piotr Balcerowicz, Eva de Clercq, Julia Hegewald, Peter Flügel, and Jaykumar Jalaj.

The writings of stalwart Jain Ācāryas such as **Kundakunda, Samantabhadra, Umāsvāmī, Pūjyapāda, Joindu, Prabhācandra, Devasena, Mānatuṅga, Siddhasena Divākara, Padmanandi** and several others are published in this series.

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